



Inspection Job Is Perfect Fit for Jerabek

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Editors note: This is one in a series of feature stories about DATCP employees and their programs.

MADISON – "Every day's a field trip," says Konnie Jerabek, a plant pest and disease specialist who can't believe her luck in landing a job that pays her to look at plants and talk to the people who grow them.

Jerabek is the face of the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection for growers and dealers in 19 northwestern Wisconsin counties. She inspects both nursery growers and dealers, along with Christmas tree farms, lumber and log operations, and any agricultural commodity heading to international markets. She's looking for plant pests and plant diseases that could hitchhike to new areas and close markets to Wisconsin products. Her certification that no pests or diseases are present makes it possible for businesses to sell their products across state and national borders.

"It's like CSI for plants," she says.

She's also looking for solutions to other problems those businesses might be experiencing – whether it's drought damage, planting trees too deep or not deep enough, or pests and diseases that don't fall under regulation but can still cost growers money.

Jerabek often speaks to classes and industry groups. "I like sharing information that other people can get something from," she says. Maybe that reflects her upbringing. Her mother was a teacher and her father was a veterinarian.

Or maybe it's that degree in horticulture from the University of Wisconsin-River Falls. It was in one of her classes there that she first heard about plant inspection jobs from a speaker. "You get to see what everybody grows?" she asked, amazed at the prospect. She graduated in 1996, joined DATCP as a temporary seasonal employee in 1997, and finally earned a permanent position in 2003.

One colleague recalls setting up a DATCP booth at the Wisconsin Christmas Tree Growers Association last summer to provide information about pesticide programs: "No one wanted to talk to me. They just flocked to Konnie when she was at the booth, and followed her around when she wasn't."

That story makes Jerabek chuckle. "I enjoy the interaction with growers, hearing about their concerns. They usually have a lot of questions for me and I try to find the answers for them," she says.

Christmas tree inspections, in fact, are probably Jerabek's first love, professionally speaking. She admires the ingenuity and skills that growers need when they're producing a crop on often marginal agricultural land, far from the urban market. They're subject to all the same vagaries of Mother Nature that other farmers face, but with a hand-labor-intensive crop that they can lose after putting years into it instead of months. "There's no cookie-cutter Christmas tree business," she observes.

From Labor Day to Thanksgiving, she spends long days traveling to Christmas tree fields that are not always easy to find, even with GPS. Besides inspecting Christmas trees still growing, she has to look up



Plant pest and disease specialist Konnie Jerabek prides herself on educating to prevent the need to regulate.

at the deciduous trees that often surround Christmas tree fields. That's where she might find gypsy moth egg masses hiding, which could limit where the grower can sell trees. She's often still working at sunset, and spending a couple of nights a week in hotels.

"But it's my favorite time of year," she says. "You have reasonable temperatures, and the views are awesome, with all the fall colors and the golden tamaracks and dark green trees."

One of the challenges of her job is convincing those new to business and unfamiliar with regulators that they really do need to be licensed. "The license requirement isn't new, but they're new, so they think the law is new. I educate first, so we don't have to regulate. I do have to enforce the rules, but my feeling is that you work alongside the grower and troubleshoot."

A native of Mount Horeb, Jerabek spent three years in the landscape architecture program at UW-Madison before marrying her husband, Scott, and moving north with him. Years later, she enrolled at UW-RF in the horticulture program. "I didn't like sitting at a drafting table. I'd rather know why that plant didn't survive," she says.

Her interests are wide-ranging, from historic log buildings to prairie restoration to genealogy to cooking. In her own gardens, she prefers unusual plants like weeping dwarf evergreens.

She and her husband have three grown children and two grandsons, born 13 days apart. Their kids live in DeForest, Milwaukee, and Denver – where her daughter is doing a medical residency in podiatry.

Jerabek credits colleagues with making her more effective. She works out of a cubicle in the Department of Natural Resources office in Baldwin, which allows her to coordinate with foresters on plant pest issues. The DATCP plant laboratory in Madison and UW-Extension insect specialist Phil Pellitteri are invaluable resources to her.

But perhaps her greatest resource is her own nature. Her job satisfies "my curiosity about things in general," she says. "It's hard to be bored."

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